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The Art of Afa Divination: *Stephen Nwedozie's Legacy in Umuazu, Nise (1966)*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Diviner Stephen Nwedozie casting
afa chains in Umuazu Nise, Nigeria,
1966. Photo: Herbert Cole.**

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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THE ART OF AFA DIVINATION

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This is a rather special photograph, taken in 1966 by one Herbert Cole, of one of the more famous diviners, Stephen Nwedozie, in Umuazu, Nise, Nigeria. The photo shows Nwedozie throwing the afa chains, a traditional means with which Igbo people foresee their future. This photograph aids in providing more insight into Igbo people's spiritual traditions and how important afa is to the way of life within the culture.

Afa refers to a conventionalized system the Igbo people use to tap into information from the spirit world. They believe through it, they will get guidance or advice from spirits and ancestors. Many times, it is used for solving a problem, answering questions, and guiding people in making their decisions. It assists people with a lot of problems, both personally and within the community.

These afa diviners, called dibia afa, are specially trained to communicate with the spirit world. Using such things as afa chains—strings with objects like shells or beads attached—the diviner would “read” from spirits. Then, the interpreter would interpret how those things have fallen after he has thrown them. This helps people make major decisions pertaining to their personal lives and communities.

Stephen Nwedozie: A Famous Diviner

Stephen Nwedozie was a very accomplished diviner, and he gained a lot of respect in the village of Umuazu, Nise. He was quite important in his community because he had the ability to cast Afa chains. People

usually came to him for advice on many issues: decisions about disputes, leadership problems, and much more.

Among the Igbo, a diviner such as Nwedozie was more than a spiritual guide in maintaining communal peace and stability. Diviners mediated disputes between neighbors, advised on communal decisions and balanced social relationships, which won him respect as a leader through his wisdom and qualifications.

One of the important works a diviner does is helping to iron out conflicts. In Igbo society, there were usually disagreements pertaining to land matters, family, or marriage, and people would go to them for advice. The afa divination would find out the cause of the problem and advise on the solution to such a problem. Often, this involved the performance of rituals or the making of offerings to bring peace and balance.

Diviners like Nwedozie know exactly how to locate the hidden problems that are causing chaos. They communicate with the spirit world and provide a solution that enables the community to coexist peacefully.

Divination in Decision-Making and Leadership

Afa divination was also an important means of decision-making. For example, the Igbo people would consult diviners before major decisions were made regarding the selection of their leaders or prior to the commencement of community projects. Diviners were trusted to provide insight into what to do based on what they learned through afa divination.

This ability to read afa chains became specialist knowledge whereby Stephen Nwedozie gained prestige among the leaders and society at large, who sometimes consulted with him when trying to determine the direction of key decisions in Umuazu and beyond.

Herbert Cole's Photograph: Capturing Igbo Spirituality

Herbert Cole, the American student of African culture, took this photograph of Nwedozie in 1966. The photo shows a critical moment in the casting of the afa chains as Nwedozie was asking for the guidance of the spirits. This is serious business and Cole's photograph conveys a sense of the intensity of concentration called for by divination.

Divination through the casting of afa chains is done by tossing the strings and observing closely how objects fall. Indeed, every fallen position of the chain and objects has its meaning, which a diviner like Nwedozie would know how to interpret. This photo presents an extremely rare representation of how this centuries-old art of divination really works.

The Afa Chains: Tools for Connecting with the Spirits

Afa itself is a special tool of divination made of strings attached to objects such as seeds, beads, or shells. On throwing the chains, the diviner would look to see how the objects fell and know what the spirits were trying to say.

These chains are important symbols, and manifestations of the liaison between the physical and spiritual worlds. Diviners like Nwedozie were seen as liaisons in the delivery of messages between spirits and humans.

Although times have changed and new religions like Christianity have spread, afa divination remains Igbo culture. It may not be in wide practice in modern times, but people seek an afa diviner for spiritual guidance, healing, and aid in making hard decisions.

Herbert Cole's photograph of Stephen Nwedozie casting afa chains reminds one of how deep the Igbo people's spiritual traditions are. In many ways, it is diviners that have taken the leading role in maintaining peace and solving problems, followed by advice within a community.

The photograph, taken in 1966, of Stephen Nwedozie casting afa chains in Umuazu, Nise, Nigeria is an important piece of cultural history. It depicts Nwedozie, an erudite and widely experienced afa diviner, performing afa, the Igbo Indigenous system of divination. His role in society extended beyond spiritual affairs: he was called upon to settle disputes, advise the leaders, and maintain social balance. The photograph taken by Herbert Cole represents Igbo spirituality and also the enduring importance of their cultural practices.

1. Cole, Herbert M. “Mbari: Art and Life Among the Owerri Igbo.” Indiana University Press, 1982.

This book by Herbert Cole explains Igbo art and culture, including the practice of afa divination.

2. Okeke, Chinweizu. “The Role of Divination in Traditional Igbo Society.” University of Nigeria Press, 2005.

3. Metuh, Emefie Ikenga. “The Gods in Retreat: Continuity and Change in African Religions.” Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1985.

This book looks at African religions, including the role of afa divination in Igbo culture.

4. Umeh, John A. “After God is Dibia: Igbo Cosmology, Divination & Sacred Science in Nigeria.” Trafford Publishing, 1999.

A detailed look at how afa diviners (dibia) help people and communicate with the spirit world.

5. Onwuejeogwu, M. Angulu. “An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom & Hegemony.” Ethnographica, 1981.

A history of the Nri Kingdom, with information about their divination practices like the ones in Umuazu, Nise

6. Cole, Herbert M. “ Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos.” UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1984.

A catalog of Igbo art and spiritual practices, including the role of diviners in the community.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idenze Ezeme

Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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